

# CAVE History Update

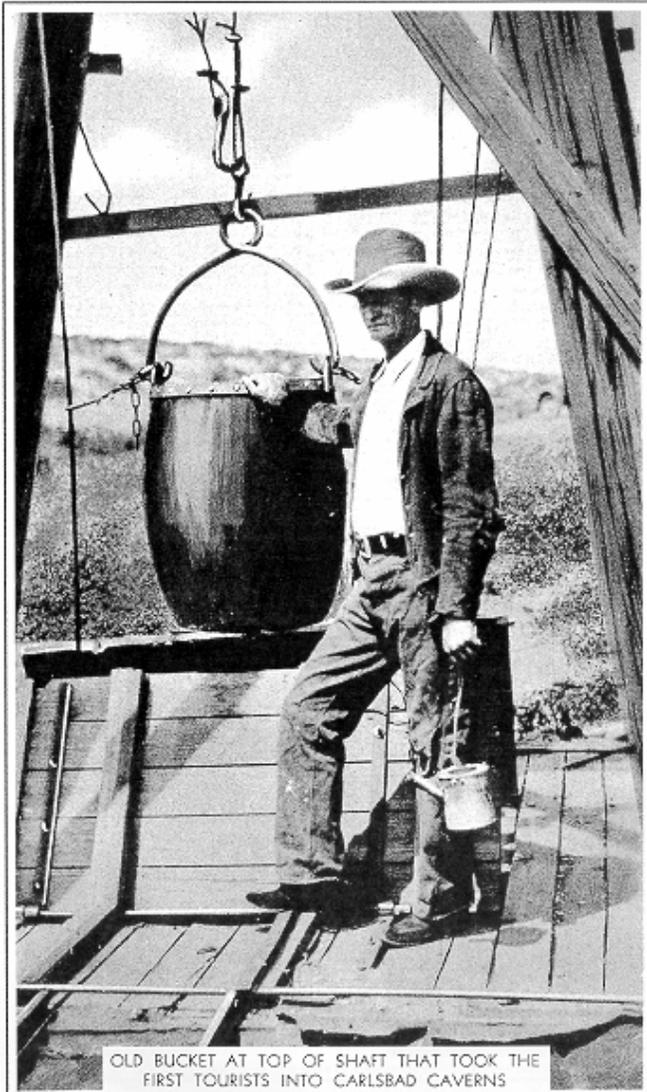
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Carlsbad Caverns National Park  
New Mexico



*A Newsletter from Carlsbad Caverns National Park's Cultural Resources Office  
in the Resources Stewardship and Science Division*

*April 27, 2005*



OLD BUCKET AT TOP OF SHAFT THAT TOOK THE  
FIRST TOURISTS INTO CARLSBAD CAVERNS

Jim White, Jr. turned 86 on March 19<sup>th</sup>. In 1994, I interviewed him and wrote an article in the September 2, 1994 issue of *History Leads & Resources*. Following is the article:

*August 31, 1994: Interview with Mr. Jim White, Jr.*

Last week, I received a call from Mr. Jim Dunwoody of San Diego, California. He said that his dad, Sam Dunwoody, had gone into the cave in the “old days” with Jim White. Planning a visit this October, Mr. Dunwoody wanted to know if there was anyone still alive from that general period with whom he could talk.

I called Mr. Jim White, Jr. and explained the situation to him. He agreed to receive a letter from Mr. Dunwoody. I also asked Mr. White if I could conduct an oral history interview with him and he agreed.

I met Mr. Jim White, Jr. at his home on August 31, 1994, at 10:00 in the morning. He was very friendly and hospitable. In his living room hangs a large picture of his dad and Arthur Mayes, a local rancher years ago. (Arthur Mayes was grandfather to former employees Dolie Bond and father-in-law to Cal Miller, a park ranger who served here in the late 1920s, early 1930s, and in the 1950s as assistant superintendent.)

Mr. White showed me several *Jim White's Own Story* books, some postcards, photographs, correspondence, and a few newspaper clippings. He showed me a 1946 petition for Jim White's remains to be buried near the natural entrance. Petitioners were required to sign their

number of years as residents of New Mexico, and the year that they went down in the guano bucket. I wonder what the “guano bucket certification” had to do with such a petition.

I talked with Mr. White until 11:45 a.m. The tape recorder was turned off several times when he asked me to follow him to some pictures or books. What follows are paraphrased comments which Mr. White made. When a couple duplicate tapes are made of the original tape, interested employees may listen to them.

I asked him to state his full name, birthplace and birthday. He responded “James Larkin White, Jr., Carlsbad, New Mexico, March 23, 1913. (NOTE: he told me later that Larkin was the name of his grandfather).

He had told me on the phone previously that when his mother gave birth to him, she went into town, gave birth, and returned to their “shack by the Bat Cave” within three to four days.

Mr. White lived at the cave, with some periods being spent in town, until he was 15 or 17.

He said that they didn't have any water in those days and had to haul it from Oak Springs (a couple twenty gallon cans on a burro.) When Jim White, Sr. went to work at Oak Springs, he would take the burro with him, fill the cans, and turn the burro loose to find its own way home. Fannie, Jim's wife, would empty the cans into a barrel. Electricity came sometime between 1929 and 1930 when the power plant was built' and one of the guano companies purchased electricity from the National Park Service for their operation. The electricity was turned on at 6 a.m. and off at 11 p.m.

Mr. White remembers when he was five or six having a tutor for a year or so at the cave and then being taught school in a tent by the wife of one of the rangers. In later years, he would attend school in Carlsbad during the winter, staying with friends.

He said, "I was about as bad as my dad. I didn't get too much education. Because you have to figure I got smarter than the school teachers—and I quit school."

"...a burro that could deliver water from Oak Springs without being led home..."

Jobs he held: he worked in the mines (as a kid). He served in the Air Force stateside from September 12, 1942 – February 24, 1946, with most of his service at Kirtland Air Force Base, in Albuquerque. He ran the book concession with his dad until Jim White, Sr. died in April 1946, and then with his mother. The book sales were good in the summer, but sometimes in the winter he would drive all the way out from Carlsbad and sell only one or two books.

After the service, he worked as a pipe fitter (primarily) and plumber for three to four years in Washington State and throughout California. He also worked at the Nevada atomic bomb test site and came to Carlsbad to work in the early 1960s when his mother was ill, prior to passing away. After some more work in Tucson, Arizona, he returned to Carlsbad and worked as a dispatcher at the Ivestor's Bus Company for eight years. He retired in 1984.

When I told Jim White, Jr. that we had a picture of him in the guano bucket with Elizabeth Lee (in 1924, during the National Geographic sponsored expedition), he said "I was in love with her. I was about five or six years old and I really thought a lot of her."

"I was in love with her."

I asked him about his first impressions of the cave. Did there come a day when his dad took him in the cave? He replied that he went in when he was about 5 or 6, at the time Willis, Dana, and Elizabeth Lee were there.

He also remembered that Vernon Bailey, the Department of Agriculture biologist who wrote on the natural history of the Caverns, used to show him bats that he was dissecting for study.

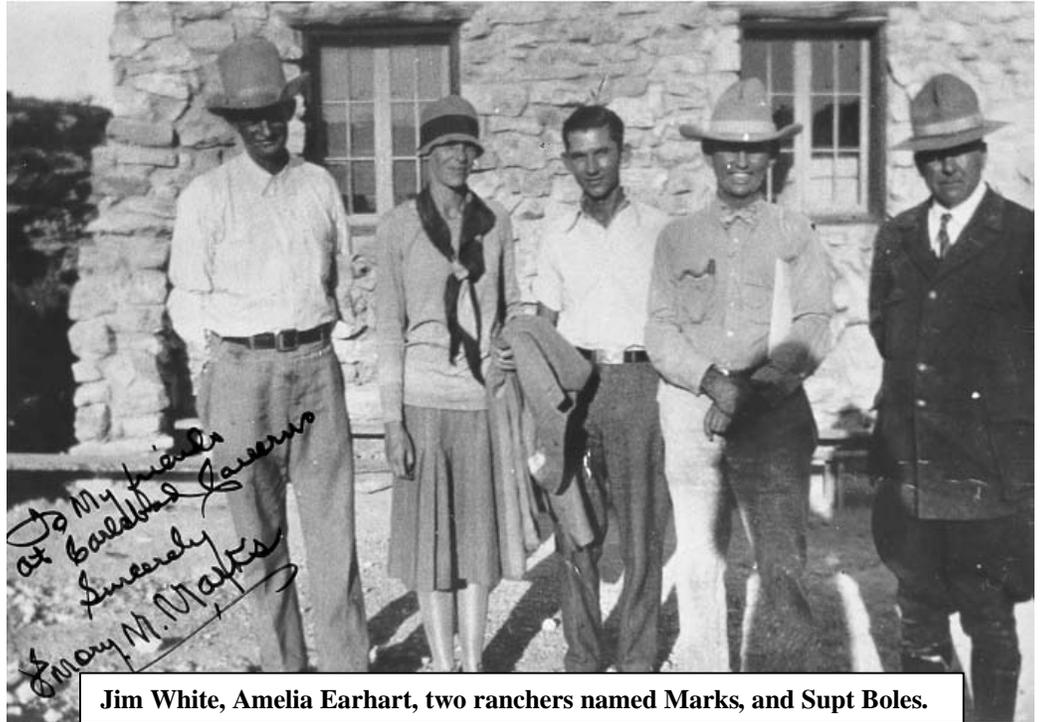
Jim White, Jr. remembers that after one guano mining company shut down, he and another kid named Cap Best sacked up some guano, loaded it in the back of a pickup, and took it to town to sell, mainly as grass fertilizer. He also remembers a "dry dock" at Whites City for drying out bat guano prior to shipment.

He could also remember riding a guano wagon down the hill to Whites City. The hill going up to the Cavern was so steep that only one type of car—"a Baby Overland" manufactured by the Willys Co.—could drive forward up the hill (WOW!!, A car that could live up to its name: Overland, not Baby) The Model T car, with its gravity-fed fuel pump had to **back up the hill**. (Can you imagine the employee van having to back up the Big Hill? Not with me in it!) As a child, Jim White, Jr. was afraid of the hill.

<sup>1</sup> Copy of the National Register of Historic Places Nomination form, Section: Bldg. 10, in *History Leads and Resources*, 92.02

I asked him if his dad had talked much to him and his mom about the cave. He said, “Oh yeah, *he didn’t talk much period*, but he was interested in that cave. That was his life. He spent his life out there.”

He remembers that his dad worked for every bat fertilizer company that owned the Bat Cave. In 22 years, there were ten or twelve companies that owned the Bat Cave mining rights. Mr. Jim White, Jr. remembered that the guano was shipped to California for use on the orange groves and he concluded, based on the frequency with which the guano mining interests changed hands, that the bat guano mining operation wasn’t too profitable for anyone.



Jim White, Amelia Earhart, two ranchers named Marks, and Supt Boles.

He also remembers that the last guano mining company had a mill in Carlsbad and that they mixed sulphur and guano for transportation, though Jim White, Jr. has no explanation for the use of a sulphur/guano combination product.

I asked him about his dad wearing cowboy boots in the cave (we all recognize the inappropriateness of cowboy boot footwear in the cave today). He said that his dad wore a “cowboy shoe,” a lace up high top shoe. (Harold West says that today such footwear are called “lacers”—they probably gain nothing in traction over cowboy boots, but allow more ankle support).

I asked him to describe his dad’s personality and told him that I had always pictured him as not much of a talker. He said that, “he was quiet; whenever he said something, he meant it.”

He said that when people came by his dad would take them down in the cave. At first he didn’t charge them anything, then he started charging them \$2 a person. If they didn’t have any money, he would take them anyway.

He quoted his dad as saying he thought of the cave “as a hell of a hole in the ground,” but added that his dad couldn’t see as much in those days as you can see now because of the lights. He also added that when they came out with the Coleman lanterns, you could see it pretty good. He thought that when the use of the Coleman lanterns first started, every fifth person in a group carried one. I asked him if he could remember when the Coleman lanterns came out and he said when he was a “good size kid.”

In the Bat Cave, they used old carbide miner lights. (NOW READ CLOSELY) They let a burro in a harness down into the cave on Monday and didn’t bring it up until Saturday. It pulled the mining carts down in the cave.

He remembered that most of the mined guano came out of the west shaft, not the east one. His Dad said that when he went into the Bat Cave, the guano was piled up so high that he could just about touch the ceiling with his hat.

I asked him about the names of any men that his dad worked with and used the example “Dave Mitchell.” He said that he knew Dave Mitchell real well, that he was a nice guy, and that outside of his father, Jim White, Sr. Dave Mitchell knew more about the cave than anybody else in the country. (Note: Dave Mitchell started in the NPS at the age of 37, in July of 1927, as a per diem guide, making \$4 a day. In his 30- year career, he also served as assistant chief ranger, laborer and pumpman).

I asked him about superintendent Tom Boles. He remembered when they came in, how they arrived (train), the stone house built for Boles over by the present- day Albertson’s, and the Boles’ daughter’s name (Margaret) When Boles first arrived, he and Jim White didn’t get along worth a d- - - . But then they became close friends. Tom Boles was a pallbearer at Jim White’s funeral. Jim White, Jr. added that Boles was a “picture- taking dude. He took nine million pictures.”

I told Mr. White that today we don’t know who “discovered the cave first.” He responded that a lot of old-timers have seen that hole. He said that Ned Shattuck had gone by there.

He reported witnessing several return bat flights and added that there used to be a lot of bats, but now there aren’t many, probably due to dryness.

I asked him if he thought that his dad was attracted to the Cavern entrance by bats and he said “yes.” He added that he thought that his father and some Mexican employees were building a fence for the Lucas Brothers Ranch. He said that the Lucas Ranch was located where the Washington Ranch is today.

He said that his dad went into the cave, not because he was brave, but because he was curious about where the bats were coming from. He believes the year was 1901.

I asked him if he thought his dad went in the cave, in the earlier years, alone or with others. He said that he mostly went alone. He related that he went into the cave for three days with a Mexican kid named “Pothead.” He added that his dad found two human skeletons above the King’s Palace and Queen’s Chamber near Iceberg Rock and the set of wooden stairs (top of Appetite Hill?). He brought out the skulls and gave them to Doctors Pate and Culpepper. He doesn’t know what ever happened to them. His dad told him that he had found the skeletons there, but that he had no idea how they got there.

He reported that his dad never should have gotten the chief ranger job in the first place since he wasn’t qualified for it. Jim White, Sr. and Colonel Tom Boles argued a lot when Jim resigned his job, expecting a “chief explorer” job offer in its place. Jim White, Jr. said that his dad was expecting that position to be offered, but it never was. At that time, White and Boles weren’t getting along too good. But once Jim White, Sr. began selling books in the underground lunchroom, he and Boles started getting along better.

The only person that Jim White, Jr. didn’t like in the NPS was superintendent Don Libbey<sup>2</sup>, who he felt hassled his family about the book concession.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, the strictness of the regulations governing the book sales resulted in Jim White, Jr. abandoning this book- selling enterprise.

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<sup>2</sup> Superintendent, CCNP: June 28, 1946 – April 1, 1951, from Historic Listing of National Park Service Officials, U.S. Department of the Interior, May 1, 1986

<sup>3</sup> Note: Libbey arrived approximately 2 months after Jim White, Sr.’s death.

Frank Ernest Nicholson never explored anything in the cave that Jim White, Sr. hadn't already discovered. He wrote *Jim White's Own Story* for Charlie White to satisfy his room and board bill at Whites City, run up during his stay there during the Nicholson "Expedition" in the cave in 1930. Charlie White printed the book and retained half the copyright.

I asked him if he thought that Frank Ernest Nicholson had exaggerated some of his dad's cave stories. He said that it was possible. He added that, "to sell a book, you have to fire it up a little bit; I imagine that is what Nicholson was doing."



The names Cal Miller and Arthur Mayes came up. As a civilian, Carroll (Cal) Miller built the first parking lot at the national monument with mules. He went to work with the NPS after that and returned to Carlsbad Caverns as the assistant superintendent in the 1950s. He married Amelia Mayes; her daddy, Arthur Mayes, owned a ranch five miles south of the Washington Ranch. Jim White, Sr. and Arthur Mayes were very good friends (Jim White, Jr. has a picture of his dad and Arthur Mayes hanging in his living room. As a child, Jim White, Jr. used to stay at the Mayes Ranch, visiting his friend, John Mayes).

I asked about his mom. She was born in Brady, Texas. She came to Lone Tree, New Mexico, at the age of 4. Her dad was a jailer and a deputy sheriff. She was the cook at the cave.

Jim White's sister, Roxie, was taught by Charlie White at one time. Roxie's married name was Weaver. Another sister to Jim White, Sr., Rosa, married Mr. Henry Samples, who started driving a water wagon before the streets were paved. Later, he was a night watchman, sheriff and policeman for many years.

Lige Hill, brother to Fanny Hill, (and future brother-in-law to Jim White, Sr.), was a caving friend of Jim White, Sr. He died in a Veteran's Hospital in Brownsville, Texas. In Carlsbad, Lige or his dad kept a pet bear, which Lige would wrestle.

Another brother, Fannie Hill's half-brother, Wiley Hill, was a right hand man for Uncle Bill Washington at the Washington Ranch. Wiley's nickname was "Wild-Horse." I asked Jim White, Jr. if "Wild-Horse" had ever been involved in a bat guano bucket accident that I seemed to recall. He said no, but that Wild-Horse once got sent to the state penitentiary for stealing mules, but only spent a short time in residence because Fannie and Wild-Horse's dad, who was a jailer, managed to get him out fairly quickly.

A brother to Jim White, Sr., Xury Haskel White (born August 13, 1876 in Parker County, Texas), in later life became a probate judge. According to Jim White, Jr., Xury always had poor eyesight ("He wasn't blind, but he couldn't see too good.") Xury not only went into the cave, but for a time he and his wife lived at the Caverns (Mr. Jim White, Jr. wasn't sure who Xury was working for).

I asked him if he knew about the time his dad had helped recover the body of a cave guide killed in an accident in Ogle Cave in 1915.<sup>4</sup> I had forgotten the victim's name, but he remembered "Sorrells" being the last name and I then remembered the rest of the name: "William Lafayette." He said that his dad had a sister, Iva Dell (born March 22, 1994, in San Angelo, Texas), who married Golden Mode Sorrells, so the young victim—William Lafayette Sorrells—was related to Jim White, Sr.

I told him that I had the impression from reading documents concerned with the selling of the book on Jim White's life that his mother, Fannie White, was a good businesswoman and asked him what he thought. He said, "No, not really."

We discussed the permit to sell those Jim White books in the underground lunchroom and how the terms changed through the years. He said that the initial agreement between his parents and the National Park Service was only oral. When Jim White, Jr. took over the operation, the summer sales were great. But in the winter, sometimes he would drive all the way out from Carlsbad and sell only one or two books. When superintendent Don Libbey arrived in June of 1946 to replace the transferred superintendent Tom Boles (two months after Jim White's death), the operating regulations for the book concession seemed to get stricter and Mr. Jim White, Jr. lost interest in continuing selling his dad's life story book.

The subject again turned to the Lees in general, then Elizabeth in particular. He remembered Elizabeth taking him throughout the cave to play with her.

I asked him about his dad supervising the building of the 216 steps wooden staircase straight into the Natural Entrance in 1925. He remembers Dave Mitchell, a caving friend of Jim White, Sr., who would later work for the National Park Service for 30 years beginning in 1928, as the primary builder. He also remembers Mitchell building the steps from the bottom and with each step installed, the young White's dog would get up on it. He also remembers, as a kid, sliding down the banisters of this staircase "like a bat out of hell."

A government man visited the cave around 1927 or 1928 and broke his leg in the Left Hand Tunnel (this was Landscape Architect Thomas Vint—BH). Jim White, Jr. said there wasn't any phone in the cave so he was dispatched to climb back out to get a phone call to Dr. Glazer from the ticket office at the Entrance. He took all available shortcuts, didn't stay on the trail, and made it out in 18 minutes.

When I asked him if he had ever heard of any other accidents in the cave, he said, "Old Jack Rupe's dad got killed down there working on the trail." (March 14, 1951 – Mr. Earl Rupe)

I asked him to confirm or deny the story in *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years* about the 1924 barbecue at the Washington Ranch after the completion of the National Geographic sponsored expedition. Local folks were getting increasingly alarmed about the credit "outsider" Willis T. Lee was getting about the cave and its discoveries. Colonel Etienne Bujac then introduced Jim White to the crowd as the first discoverer of the cave. He confirmed it.

Around 1930, Colonel Bujac, a lawyer, tried to help Jim White by writing letters to influential people to get Jim the chief explorer job he felt that he had been promised when he resigned as the chief ranger.

Incidentally, Bujac's son was Bruce Cabot, a Hollywood actor of some renown in the "olden" days. In the early 1930s, Colonel Bujac committed suicide in the backyard of his home, near the Pecos River. (Just down the street from where Jim White, Jr. lives today.) Jim White, Jr. said that Colonel Bujac was "a hell of a guy."

I asked him how his dad felt about the National Park Service in later years after not getting the chief explorer job. He said that after he got to selling books down there, he got over being angry at them (euphemism supplied).

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<sup>4</sup> On a Sunday afternoon, some sightseers came by, asking for him to guide. His mom didn't want him to go, but he did, and on the trip, a rock struck his head from above. Also see *History Leads and Resources*, 92.02 (November 4, 1992)

U.S. Senator Dennis Chavez helped Jim White, Sr. get the book-selling permit. According to Jim White, Jr., Senator Chavez warned the NPS that he was going to get Jim White the whole park concession operation even though White just wanted the book-selling operation. Under this political pressure, the NPS gave Jim White, Sr. the book-selling permit and Senator Chavez backed off the threat of getting the *whole* concession operation for Jim White, Sr. I asked Jim White, Jr. if Chavez did that because he thought his dad deserved it. He replied, “Yes, and because he was a good friend.” The agreement was oral at first according to Jim White, Jr., and was to cover his dad’s and mom’s lifetime at \$1.00 year.

I asked if his dad ever said anything about naming the formations. He agreed with me that he probably named a lot of them.

He showed me a picture of a man named Ert Haney. His first job in the NPS was to build the rock superintendent’s house by where Albertson’s grocery store came later. Haney worked a number of years in the NPS and his wife worked in the nursery.

I asked him if he knew what ever happened to the original guano bucket. He relied, “It’s in Charlie Dugger’s garage. I gave it to him.” He identified Charlie Dugger as a grandson of Charlie White. I asked him if this was the same guano bucket he used in the underground lunchroom when they were selling books and he said, “yes.”

“He told me that his Dad spoke pretty good Mexican.”

He volunteered that two original *Jim White’s Own Story* books cost him \$40 in a Santa Fe garage sale, located by Franklin Smith, an ex- NPS employee.

He told me that his dad couldn’t get anyone to go into the cave with him except the Mexican kid. He told me that his dad spoke pretty good Mexican and others did too since there were many Mexican people around.

He thinks that his dad probably took about a month getting ready to go into the cave the first time “because he knew that he was going to go in there and see what the hell was in there—curious.”

Jim White, Sr. and the Mexican kid, referred to as Pothead, went into the King’s Palace and Queen’s Chamber areas, as well as the Big Room. They took a great big ball of string to string out behind them so that they could find their way out.

He broke off the stalactites as markers to get out on the first trip.

Jim White, Jr. had never heard the story about his dad losing his light, then running full steam into a cave formation.

Jim White Jr. saw what was left of the skeleton bones in the cave after his dad gave the bones to Doctors Pate and Culpepper. He said that his dad never had any idea of how the bones got there, but he found them.

I enjoyed the hour and a half that I spent talking to Mr. Jim White, Jr.

**March 17, 2005 – I just called Mr. White to wish him Happy Birthday and to see how he was doing. He has a cold and doesn’t feel well, but other than that is doing fine. He is a remarkable man. I told him that I was retired and to call me at home if he wanted to talk. He has shared so much for our CAVE history and the story of his dad, the unofficial “Mr. Carlsbad Caverns.” – Bob Hoff**